
Case Study Report

Participation in the decision-making process of regularization policies in Buenos Aires.

The case of Villa 20 in Buenos Aires Autonomous City

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Abstract

In Latin American cities informal settlements and insecure land tenure are the result of an exclusionary planning and urban management system which fails to provide legal and secure housing for lower-income groups. Against this backdrop, the State implemented land-title and urban regulatory policies, in order to improve the housing conditions of these neighbourhoods and integrate their residents into the legal regime. This paper proposes to address the conflicts implied in the processes of urbanization and regularization of the villas of the city of Buenos Aires during the first government of Rodríguez Larreta (2015-2019). In the official political discourse, the urbanization of informal settlements is considered one of the main axes of local management. Within this framework, institutional changes are being carried out, such as the creation of the Ministry of Social and Urban Integration. This report proposes to address the participation implied in the process of urbanization and regularization of Villa 20 in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. This process have raised many challenges in the interaction between government decision-making and the needs of inhabitants of informal settlement. These challenges are linked to a) the democratic participation of the inhabitants in the decision-making process at all stages, b) land management policies and domain regularization; c) the modalities and logic of relocation of inhabitants; d) the provision and access to infrastructure services and public spaces; e) the treatment of tenants and other more vulnerable groups. Based on the analysis of the case study, we propose to account for the limits and scope of the implemented urbanization policy as well as for the opportunities to expand the horizon of tools and intervention modalities promote the right to the city and reduce territorial inequalities.

Keywords

Slum upgrading; Housing policies; Urban informality; Buenos Aires; Villas

1. The challenges of slum upgrading in planning practice

In several cities of Latin America – and of the Global South in general – informal practices rather than formal channels of public regulation have been for decades an ordinary and (often) dominant means by which to access and develop urban land (UN-Habitat, 2015). It is against this backdrop that several efforts to foster formalisation and more effective public regulation have been promoted by public institutions and international agencies, whilst simultaneously non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and groups formed by the urban poor have tried on several occasions to push urban planning and policies to better answer their needs.

Measure implement by policy makers in order to solve informality tend to requires two types of interventions. One is to prevent the establishment of new informal settlements. The other is to address the deficiencies of existing settlements through programs that (1) provide formal legal recognition of the communities, as well as individual or other forms of ownership and legal possession; (2) remedy gaps in public services; and (3) promote local economic opportunities and growth (Fernandes, 2010; Clivchesky, 2003). While stressing the crucial importance of conceiving and implementing a set of preventive policies that widen the conditions of access to serviced urban land and housing, this article focuses primarily on the review of an experience of regularization of an existing informal settlements in Buenos Aires Autonomous city between 2016 and 2020.

Although there are many experiences of intervention in the re-urbanization of informal settlements in Argentina, such as those developed in the framework of the Promeba and Rosario Hábitat programs, or in Latin America, such as the Favela Barrio and Neighborhood Improvement programs in Colombia, Uruguay, Ecuador, Peru, etc., in this case, the particular characteristics of the villas Autonomous City of Buenos Aires require a specific look and certain instruments adjusted to the nature of the case. The management of processes and projects for the improvement of villas in the context of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires has had numerous ups and downs. From the first intervention paradigms that promoted their eradication to current paradigms that promote their establishment, the practices have been insufficient for the scale and complexity of the problem. Re-urbanization implies considering the social production of habitat and generating interventions to transform and give urban quality to popular settlements. The case of Villa 20 shows the application of an open process-project system applied to planning that allows a complex approach that is continuously adapted to the particular situation of the neighborhood and aims to achieve the optimization of results through community consensus in decisions-making.

This report proposes to address the participation implied in the process of urbanization and regularization of Villa 20 in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires during the first government of Rodríguez Larreta (2015-2019). Based on the analysis of the case study, we propose to account for the limits and scope of the implemented urbanization policy as well as for the opportunities to expand the horizon of tools and intervention modalities promote the right to the city and reduce territorial inequalities.

The structure of the report is as follows: in section 1 we highlight some of the challenges that planning practice face in the regularization and slum-upgrading processes, in section 2 we analyze the comprehensive urban upgrading project of Villa 20, looking at the socio urban context of Villa 20, the methodology applied within the process and finally the results of the urban and participatory slum upgrading process.

2. Recent slum upgrading policies in Buenos Aires Autonomous city

In Argentina, the National Registry of Informal Neighbourhoods (RENABAP) has recorded 4,400 informal neighbourhoods in the country, (MSDS, 2019), with more than 4 million inhabitants living in informal conditions and without basic services. The population living in villas in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) grew by 50 per cent between 2001 and 2010, and at present totals around 200,000 people. For the most part, this population is located in the southern part of the city, concentrated in Communes 8, 7, and 4.

Since 2016 the city government has been committed to an ambitious and ongoing urban and social integration plan for informal settlements. During the first government of Rodríguez Larreta (2015-2019) *Instituto de la Vivienda (IVC)* and the *Secretaria de Integración Social y Urbana* implemented different upgrading projects of some selected villas of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Villa 31, Villa Fraga, Villa Rodrigo Bueno, Villa 20). Between December 2015 and December 2019, the city administration was aligned with that of the national state, leading to coordinated interventions in the informal settlements in the city. This political initiative responded to both social and economic factors. On the one hand, there was a felt need to address living conditions in informal settlements, a need that had been ignored by past administrations. On the other hand, there was a desire to promote the development of the south of the city, in particular Commune 8, which had the city's worst indicators in terms of habitat and housing. In addition, the city of Buenos Aires was to host the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, and the Olympic village and park were built in Commune 8, a few blocks away from V20. These involved important investments directly linked to the Olympic event, but which also affected urban renovation in the area, including the upgrading process of V20 and the construction of new housing in Barrio Papa Francisco. The Institute of Housing of the City of Buenos Aires (Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad – IVC) was placed in charge of both the upgrading process and the housing construction. Villa 20 is located in the Villa Lugano neighbourhood in Commune 8 in the southern part of CABA. It is the city's fourth most populous slum, with approximately 27,990 inhabitants (IVC, 2016a), almost 20 per cent of the city's total slum population (Cosacov et al, 2011) Its 48 hectares are divided into three sectors: a consolidated sector (12 ha) that went through various redevelopment projects up to the mid-2000s; a sector with no prior intervention (24 ha) that developed informally through residents' efforts; and a border sector (12 ha), called Pope Francis, formerly used as a car graveyard and later reserved for new housing as part of the integrated urban intervention process in the neighbourhood (1,665 new homes are being built by the government for the relocation of 20 per cent of the population living in the other two sectors). Until urban upgrading work started, Villa 20 had, like most informal settlements, poor quality or informal provision of water, sanitation, electricity and drainage. Roads were in poor condition and there were minimal solid waste collection, health and education services, and maintenance of communal areas. Overcrowding led to buildings of three or four storeys with very poor ventilation and natural light, subpar safety standards, and a complete lack of green open space. The land in this neighbourhood began to be occupied in 1948. In 1976, the population decreased drastically due to slum eradication programmes carried out by the military dictatorship, but since the 1990s there has been further growth and densification. In 2000, an intervention plan involving new housing and the widening of alleys began in a very small area within the consolidated sector. This was completed, after several interruptions, in 2006.



Figure 1. Image of Villa 20 in Buenos Aires. Source: IVC.

The relationship between the neighbourhood and state institutions was re-established in 2016, marked however by a history of mistrust and conflict. Two factors played a central role. First, a set of laws was

signed but never implemented, namely the Urbanization of Villa 20 Law (Ley de Urbanización de Villa 20 / No. 1,770 of 2005), and the Environmental, Health and Infrastructure Emergency Law (Ley de emergencia ambiental y sanitaria y de infraestructura de la Villa 20/ No. 2,054 of 2008), both aiming to bring about long-expected improvements for residents in V20. Second, there was a collective takeover of vacant land adjacent to Villa 20 that had formerly been used as a car graveyard and the immediate eviction in August 2014. These factors together triggered greater social organization and aligned social demands. According to census data collected by the IVC in August 2016 (IVC, 2016a) at the beginning of the participatory process of socio-urban integration, approximately 27,990 people lived in Villa 20, with 9,116 families and 4,559 dwellings. Twenty-four per cent of these families were renters, 63 per cent of the population was young (under 29), 59 per cent was employed, 70 per cent of homes had two floors, 90 per cent had informal access to basic services, and most homes were made from good building materials (IVC, 2016a).

3. The re-urbanization project of Villa 20

When the intervention process was approved, the first step was to re-engage with social actors in V20, define intervention goals and involve relevant local actors in the decision-making process. The main issues raised by the neighbours in V20 at the beginning of the upgrading process were: a) a strong scepticism and distrust related to the precarious condition of the neighbourhood and the lack of response from the state in the past; b) a demand for more participation and greater involvement in the decision-making process and the participatory spaces generated; c) a demand for co-definition of the criteria used to award new houses and other benefits arising from the process; d) incorporation of the right to housing for renters; and e) the need to conduct a census (Motta&Almansi, 2017).

Considering those initial concerns, over the course of 2016 a multi-actor decision-making space called the Participatory Management Table (MGP) was consolidated. This included members of the Neighbourhood Board, social actors, block leaders or association leaders, independent neighbours, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations. The process of shaping this space was initiated by the IVC and included the generation of agreements with each of the actors involved in any way in the upgrading and socio-urban integration process, and their inclusion in decision-making.

After presenting the MGP, it began to meet periodically and began a process of structural definitions of the process that included:

- the design and presentation of an urban and architectural project for housing, equipment and public space to be developed in the *Papa Francisco sector*, which allowed the first tender to begin in October 2016;
- presentation of the urban infrastructure project to be developed in the consolidated and *macizo* sectors in the current awarding and bidding process;
- the holding of a public hearing, within the framework of compliance with Law No. 1,770, in which the outline of the Comprehensive Re-Urbanization Project (PIRU) was presented;
- the participatory design of the Census operation carried out in August 2016 by the IVC and also framed in compliance with Law No. 1,770;
- the preparation, approval and regulation of the bill for the re-urbanization, zoning and socio-urban integration of Villa 20 approved in November 2016 (Law No. 5705) that allowed to legitimize the process;
- the participatory design of the operation Socio-Spatial Survey that allows to complement the information of the Census with a view to developing the Project Comprehensive Re-Urbanization of the neighborhood.

Law 5705 sets the scope of the Project Comprehensive Redevelopment (PIRU) that aims at urban, housing and socio-economic integration of the neighborhood.

The process steps incorporated into the Law refer to the design and execution and the definition of the appropriate criteria for:

- the construction of new housing,
- existing home improvement,
- the opening and consolidation of public roads,
- the provision of urban equipment,

- the improvement and consolidation of the space public, and
- the provision of infrastructure (drinking water networks, electrical power, sewage, and storm drains).



Figure 2. The three steps of the Re-Urbanization Project (PIRU). Source: IVC.

3.1. Methodology and planning tools implemented in the process

The strategy developed for V20 is based on a “process-project” planning model, which implies that the result is not a “pre-defined product” prepared at an office desk with a technocratic approach, but a “target product” arising from a participatory process and consensus building. This “target product” is not necessarily fully defined; it is rather an objective towards which the actions are directed, allowing for modifications of both the path used and the final product (Motta and Almansi, 2017).

The IVC approach through the logic of "process-project" -which implies feedback from the project throughout the process- is innovative in at least four aspects. First, the IVC addresses the problem from a comprehensive perspective, understanding that the improvement of living conditions in the villas must go beyond the physical improvement of the housing units. Second, community participation is considered essential and a structuring component in every step of the process. This is a departure from the classic approach that "informs" the community rather than integrating it into the planning of their neighborhood. Third, the IVC initiative breaks with the logic of traditional projects, since it does not impose the same process on each neighborhood. Finally, the IVC places emphasis on monitoring and evaluation with a deep interest in measuring the results of each intervention, the effectiveness of the programs, and the role of participation in conflict resolution, ownership and sustainability (IVC,2017).

3.2. Results and analysis of the Re-urbanization project of Villa 20

Four years after the beginning of the intervention, the main results of the urban upgrading project of Villa 20 are visible and possible to evaluate.

First of all is important to consider the aspect of the participation and involvement of the citizens in the decision-making process. The participatory strategy in V20 has had a significant impact. Its inclusion as the central axis of intervention and a tool of democratic governance has enhanced the impact of local actions by guaranteeing decision-making spaces for the population, and ensuring the sustainability over time of new agreements in complex and often contradictory negotiation processes around the distribution of benefits.

The participation spaces each allow for resident involvement (informational, consultative or decision-making), and together they form a system for co-management of the upgrading process, playing a crucial role in decision-making during the planning, implementation and monitoring stages.

The participatory process worked as a tool for conflict management and resolution, reducing or avoiding obstacles throughout the process. Participation mechanisms made it possible to reduce and manage the conflicts that arose as the process progressed. The contribution made by the neighborhood organizations contributed to outlining the process, legitimizing and contributing substantial elements to the IVC's proposals. The devices generated spaces for exchange and dialogue and made possible the incorporation of popular knowledge and knowledge of the neighbours. Although the project for each block is often defined by the IVC's “technical knowledge”, the objective of the workshops was to obtain a consensual project that incorporates the popular knowledge of the neighbours. The IVC also created new devices as the process progressed, attesting to their adaptability. Furthermore, the importance given to the quality of the information provided helped to increase the levels of satisfaction of the residents. This was complemented with information channels to publicize the project and its progress. The participatory process also contributed to a greater dynamization of the IVC and administrative procedures, with a greater capacity to resolve conflicts.

In terms of spatial transformations all projects for the blocks were voted on. Over 24 months, agreements were reached among approximately 4,200 families, supported by 80 technical advisors.

Also, the first 830 families (40 per cent of those expected to move) have moved into their new homes and completed the 10-step upgrading process. In the process of moving people and freeing up spaces, there has been no invasion of cleared land and streets; 97.6 per cent acceptance and compliance with relocation; demolition of 335 homes to open streets and insert the new layout; the opening of 400 linear metres of streets; the freeing up of 140 metres of alleys; the construction of 834 homes; 153 emergency repairs on highly precarious homes; the official establishment of 50 per cent of the resident associations for new buildings in Pope Francis. In terms of provision of infrastructure, the water, sewage, electricity,

and drainage infrastructure in the sector without previous interventions is being established. In terms of city health and education departments were incorporated into the participatory process to build a new health centre, refurbish another, and build a new primary school for 700 children. (Motta&Almansi, 2017).



Figure 3. New buildings in Pope Francis sector. Source: Ferlicca

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